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Brides and Grooms: Embroidery of the Epirus Region

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Traditional marriage ceremonies in the Epirus (Ípeiros) region of northwestern Greece were some of the most extravagant wedding celebrations among the Greeks on the mainland and islands. The textiles produced for the young bride's trousseau were as elaborate as the celebrations. They included garments for her and her husband and textiles for their home. These textiles tell us many things about the region's political, economic and artistic history. Ottoman Empire held the Greek mainland and islands in their control for centuries leaving their mark in many aspects of daily life and the arts and as an extension of arts in textiles.

Among the mainland regions of Greece, Epirus has a special place in the study of Greek textiles, especially embroidery. It presents an entirely different embroidery style from that of the Greek islands with which it is often associated. This is due to two factors; Epirus was geographically situated among trade routes and its political and artistic history was closely associated with the Ottoman Empire's. This paper presents the story of how the Ottoman Turkish and Greek political, economic, and artistic histories are intertwined in the period preceding the 19th century.

As one of the major artistic outputs, the Epirus embroidered textiles were a means of communicating cultural values by exhibition designs and techniques that are Greek. But they utilized certain Ottoman motifs in their designs. The way these textiles were used in the domestic environment also reflects Ottoman sensibilities. We may argue that the embroidered textiles may have served as a medium for social cohesion. The ways some of these textiles were used in daily life and the clues in the scenes depicted on some of them reveal how integral the Ottoman way of life was to the Epirus society.

The Epirus region is located in northwestern Greece. Between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries a portion of what is now southern Albania, including the town of Argyrokastron (Gjirokastër) on the coast of the Ionian Sea was part of the region as well. Epirus is a rugged and mountainous region.[1] For centuries, ideas and goods moved on overland trade routes between Europe and western Asia through the Epirus region, which was the gatekeeper of communication. Besides possessing strategic importance, the region also encompasses fertile agricultural lands. This region was strategically located and rich in many ways and as a result of these factors its population was wealthier than other Greek mainland regions and its textile tradition demonstrates that fact. Customarily produced for the bridal trousseaux using silk threads on linen foundation fabric, embroidered textiles in Epirus region were used both in the domestic environment and in religious and civil ceremonies.

The houses of rich Epirus families, especially those in the capital, Ioánnina, were big and in plan, division of living quarters, and interior decoration similar to Ottoman houses found in

[1] It is largely made up of mountainous limestone ridges, part of the Dinaric Alps that in places reach 2,650 m. The climate of Epirus is mainly alpine. The vegetation is made up mainly of coniferous species.

Istanbul and other parts of the empire. The main living area was divided into separate sections for men and women. The men's portion was slightly bigger because it contained a reception room, but both the men's and women's sections were decorated the same way. The fireplace was the focal point of the room, and low divans (sofas) along the wall surrounded the empty center space. Woven and embroidered textiles were hung from the front of the divans, which were strewn with pillows. It is possible that valances were also used on these divans.

The large covers embroidered along all four edges are often identified as bedspreads and their embroidered decoration certainly supports this idea. Nevertheless, in European travel books of past centuries, there is no clear description of how these textiles were used in Epirus households, probably because the sleeping areas, especially those of women, would have been restricted and not accessible to male European visitors.

A separate group of embroidered textiles produced into the Epirus region, however, has a different design layout from the others, and it is not clear if they were part of the usual bridal trousseau. The motifs covering the entire surface of these textiles are organized in two- or three-square compartments framed by borders with floral scrolls on three sides, with all the motifs oriented in the same direction.[2] These textiles may have been religious objects used as altar frontals, or they may have hung on a wall or as a valance from either a table or a bench. They are covered with many flowers, birds, and human motifs. Single-masted ships with many oars, castle-like structures, deer, and double-headed eagles are frequently represented as well. The scenes also include what appear to be a bride and groom, often holding flowers above a house- or castle-like structure. Sometimes this structure contains smaller human motifs that may represent children. The imagery, therefore, suggests these textiles might have been used in marriage ceremonies.

Epirus embroidered textiles may be divided in three stylistic groups according to the stitches used: a running-stitch group, a split-stitch group, and a herringbone-stitch group. Some influences do exist among the styles in terms of design and techniques but none of them is strong enough to overshadow the distinction.

Figure 1. Running stitch in alternate alignment, bedspread (fragment, detail), Epirus (Ípeiros), 18th century. The Textile Museum 81.8, acquired by George Hewitt Myers in 1924.

[2] The best examples of this textile type are in the Benaki Museum collection, Athens (11202 and 6307), and are identified as bed valances. There are also two in the Royal Scottish Museum, Edinburgh, and one in the World Museum Liverpool (before May 2005 known as the Liverpool Museum) published in Taylor (1998, pp. 138–40).

The running stitch gives embroiderers great flexibility to manipulate its execution from row to row in order to achieve varying effects. One of the two basic techniques of filling motifs with a running stitch is to offset the stitches in each row by one warp or weft yarn, creating diagonal lines from the exposed foundation yarns (fig.1). The result is a running stitch in diagonal alignment. This type of stitch is used almost exclusively on Ottoman embroidered textiles. In the second technique, each row of stitches is worked so that the stitches begin and end next to the middle of the stitches in the previous row, so it is called running stitch in alternate alignment.

The running stitch appears on three major types of embroidered textiles: long rectangular pillow faces embroidered with running stitch in alternate alignment, bedspreads, and valances embroidered either with running stitch in diagonal alignment or alternate alignment. Long rectangular pillows with scenes of wedding ceremonies are among the most famous of Epirus embroidered textiles (fig.2).

Figure 2. Pillow face (fragment; warp direction horizontal), Epirus (Ípeiros), 17th–18th century. The Textile Museum 81.27, acquired by George Hewitt Myers before 1940.

This representative style is typically Greek. Scenes from everyday life appeared very frequently on Greek embroidered textiles. The pillows often depict a couple in the center, usually holding flowers, and sometimes riding a horse. The couple is accompanied by, a male and a female attendant. The male attendant is often depicted on horseback. These two figures may be the maid of honor and best man, and what is represented on the pillow may be the evening procession that always accompanied the groom when he escorted his fiancée from her paternal home to that of her and her future husband's home[3]. All the garments worn by the bride, groom, maid of honor, and best man demonstrate the strong influence of Ottoman culture on Epirus society. Every piece in the ensemble, from the large headgear for men (*kavuk*, or turban) to the multiple button closures on the chests of the men's and women's long coats with hanging sleeves (*kaftan*) that were adaptations of the Ottoman costume. This is an important clue to adaptation of the Ottoman way of life. At least by the sixteenth century, it appears that the urban elite of the Epirus region, especially in Ioánnina, adopted Ottoman dress adding their own individuality. The floral motifs—featuring tulips, hyacinths, and carnations—seen filling the rest of the composition on these pillows have unmistakable Ottoman origins as well. They probably came to Epirus with the influx of Ottoman textiles, art objects, and interior and exterior decorations on

[3] Thomas S. Hughes (1830, pp. 27–37) mentions that he participated in such a wedding in Ioánnina.

buildings. On the other hand, two motifs on these pillows embody the Greek spirit: the large bird with a short colorful tail and the Harpy with her bird's body and female face (fig. 3).

Figure 3. Pillow face (fragment; warp direction horizontal, detail), Epirus (Ípeiros), 17th–18th century. The Textile Museum 81.27, acquired by George Hewitt Myers before 1940.

The second embroidery style from the Epirus region which I called split stitch style, shares a strong design similarity to the running-stitch group, although the designs in this style tend to be a little more freely drawn. The split stitch creates smooth surfaces that to a certain degree resemble the effects of satin weave with its surface of long warp floats (fig. 4). Luxurious Ottoman textiles in satin weave may in fact have inspired the embroiderers. It is not surprising that the thread in split-stitch embroidery is usually untwisted silk, since this type of thread allows the needle to easily split the already worked thread and be pulled through it. The loose-lying fibers in the untwisted silk thread hide the emerging point of the splitting thread, creating a smooth surface.

Figure 4. Split stitch, bedspread (fragment, detail), Epirus, 17th–18th century. The Textile Museum 81.28, acquired by George Hewitt Myers before 1928.

Floral designs, especially with tulips and birds, are the major motifs used (fig. 5). Vases overflowing with flowers are often placed diagonally in the four corners of the textiles. Flower vases framed by female or male figures are also common. The floral motifs, tulip, hyacinth, carnation were adaptated from the Ottoman motif repertoire as well as the costumes seen on the

figures, but narrative scenes, inclusion of birds as motifs, the design arrangement on large bed spreads as well as the stitch used (split stitch) is very characteristic of Greek culture.

Figure 5. Bedspread, Epirus, late 17th–early 18th centur.y
The Textile Museum 81.70, acquired by George Hewitt Myers in 1926.

The third group of embroidered textiles from the Epirus region is completely different from the preceding styles in terms of technique, material, design, and color palette. This third group is embroidered with the herringbone stitch, which belongs to the cross-stitch family and creates an interlaced appearance on the front side of foundation fabric; contrasting strongly with the smooth surface of the running stitch and split stitch (fig. 6).

Figure 6. Herringbone stitch, cover (detail). Epirus, 17th–18th century.
The Textile Museum 81.96, acquired by George Hewitt Myers in 1937.

The motif most closely associated with this style is a large red flower represented in a bird's-eye view, with a stylized serrated leaf arching over it (fig. 7). Secondary to this motif is the floral-branch motif, with four small flower heads along with three small leaves and one large serrated leaf. A third motif consists of the same red flower head, but with two serrated leaves framing it. All these motifs are very similar to those used in Ottoman silk woven and embroidered textiles.

Figure 7. Cover, Epirus, 17th–18th century. The Textile Museum 1962.23.3, Museum purchase

The characteristics of the herringbone-stitch style create an interesting conundrum for us to consider. The group exhibits strong design similarities with Ottoman silk textiles, but the embroidery technique used is unknown in the Ottoman textile arts. While the running-stitch group discussed earlier shares closer technical similarities with the Ottoman embroidery, it appears to borrow selectively from the Ottoman motif repertoire and combines Ottoman with other more local motifs. The split-stitch group, on the other hand, does not share technical similarities with Ottoman embroidery, but like the running-stitch group, it borrows selectively from the Ottoman motif repertoire.

There is no clear evidence to suggest that these textiles were produced either in the same place or in different parts of the Epirus region. If they did come from same place, it is unclear whether they might have been produced in different periods. Forming structural groupings and identifying the characteristics of each group may help future researchers make the necessary connections and propose a more definite source for these textiles. For now, we can only suppose that the textiles from all three styles appear to be from the Ioánnina area. The expensive materials used and the strong Ottoman influence in design and technique on all three styles indicate that these textiles were produced by embroiderers who lived in a wealthy region and had easy access to Ottoman artistic products. Embroiderers from around Iáonnina fit this description very well. They knew the Ottoman tradition firsthand and knew it long and well enough to assimilate it into their work.

After the Fourth Crusade in 1204 and the sack of Constantinople, during the fragmentation of the Byzantine Empire, Michael Angelos Komnenos Doukas created the Despotate of Epirus, one of three areas where the Byzantine Empire still held sway[4]. The establishment of this despotate also helped maintain the traditions of the Byzantine Empire for another two centuries in western Greece, which was surrounded by Frankish kingdoms and Latin lords.

During the fourteenth century, political fragmentation and struggle in addition to social conditions eventually provided the Ottoman Empire with the opportunity to move into the Balkans. In 1431, Ioánnina fell, and the Ottomans annexed central and southern Albania including the Epirus region, and assimilated it into their administrative system as a sancak (county).

Ioánnina was the capital of the Epirus region and a wealthy commercial town in a strategically important region. In the eighteenth century, with the rise of Ali Paşa to the governorship of Epirus and southern Albania, Ioánnina became the biggest city in Greece and one of great opulence and sophistication. The Greek populations of Ioánnina and the surrounding territories had been a major force in the trade of the region, especially overland trade. With Ali Paşa's policies as well as the consequences of international relations, this community continued to flourish in the eighteenth century[5]. Eventually, after 482 years of Ottoman control, Ioánnina and the Epirus region fell to the Greeks during the Balkan Wars in 1913.

Epirus was one of the regions with a large Greek population that stayed in Ottoman hands the longest. During the expansion of the Ottoman Empire, Epirus was annexed into the empire much earlier than many other regions in Anatolia and northern Africa. Many aspects of Epirus culture reflected the strong Ottoman political, cultural, and social presence. During the Ottoman period, the three Epirus embroidery styles were formulated and reached their zenith in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. When compared with the other Greek embroidery styles, some of which also exhibit strong Ottoman influence, Epirus embroidery can be recognized as the style that had more direct contact with Ottoman artistic ideas and integrated these ideas more successfully into its local artistic tradition. This assimilation is probably due to the long exposure of Epirus society to Ottoman culture and to its people's living side by side with Ottoman Turks as a single society.

Although there were lots of political and social problems, which came with the Ottoman control of the Epirus region, there were extensive exchanges in artistic and cultural level between the two societies. The embroidered textiles are a good testament to the interconnectedness of Ottoman and Greek cultures in this region before the nineteenth century. They were a means of communicating cultural values of Epirus Society by exhibiting techniques and design ideas and layouts that are Greek and may have served as a medium for social cohesion by combining these with Ottoman functions and motifs.

It is worth stressing the importance of understanding the Greek textile makers, the brilliant choices they made in their work, and how they masterfully combined different artistic traditions.

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[4] For general history of Epirus region, see İnalcık 1975, pp. 11–12; İnalcık and Quataert 1994, vol. 1, pp. 15–16; Shaw 1977, vol. 1, pp. 18–19; Shaw and Shaw 1977, pp. 292–98; Stavrianos 2001, pp. 29–66 and 535–37.

[5] K. E. Fleming (1999) discusses, in great detail, the reign of Ali Paşa in Epirus. See also Hughes (1830, pp. 455–56) for his eyewitness account of Ioánnina in the 1810s.

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